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ABSTRACT

This study examines characteristics of parents in most, moderate and least agreement with their collegiate children. The sample consisted of the parents of 354 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities). Eighty-one percent of the parents completed questions about their backgrounds, methods of influencing their collegiate children, their levels of concern about different behaviors of their children, and their beliefs about U of M students. Results suggest that parents with smaller families and younger parents perceive themselves as more in agreement with their children. Parental methods of influencing their children were related to their frequency of agreement. However, parents in most, moderate and least agreement with their children did not differ significantly in their level of concern about most children's behaviors, nor did they differ in their beliefs about U of M students. (Author)

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The concept of a generation gap is frequently used to explain relationships between university students and their parents. Both Kenniston (1965) and Feuer (1969) have stressed the importance of the generation gap in understanding student dissent. However, the use of this concept in an explanatory fashion can be misleading. Research by Troll, Neugarten and Kraines (1969) suggests two generations in a family have more similarity in basic values than do various college students in the same generation. Thus, generalizing about a generation gap should be done cautiously.

Parents as well as peers influence the behavior of college students. Parents can be very instrumental in providing direction and orientation. Yet in some families parents have minimal influence and their children merely "cop out to the peer world." It is obvious that parents differ in the effectiveness with which they are reference group forces in the lives of their collegiate children, and that these differences can be reflected in the frequency with which parents and children agree about various matters. Generation gap is a concept which has been used to describe frequency of parent-child agreement.

The concept of a "generation gap" (Berdie, Loeffler and Roth 1970; Troll 1972; Cross 1967) can be defined in different ways. As used in the present study, "generation gap" is defined from a parental perspective and emphasizes differences between parents who perceived themselves in most agreement, moderate

agreement and least agreement with their collegiate children. Generation gap is a continuous variable used to describe differential parent-child agreement. This study focuses on identifying parental characteristics which are related to the parental "generation gap." Four kinds of parental characteristics will be explored: 1) their socio-demographic background; 2) their methods of trying to influence their children; 3) the degree of concern which they have about the behaviors of their children; and 4) the kinds of beliefs they have about university students.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of the parents of 354 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Minnesota (Twin Cities). A computer program was used to select every nth undergraduate name from the roster of those officially enrolled at the University during the spring quarter, 1973.

Eighty-one percent (N=288) of the parents completed the questionnaire. Sixty seven percent of those who completed the questionnaire were mothers. Forty-nine percent of the respondents were between the ages of 44 and 50 years. Eighty-five percent of the parents were presently married, 5% were divorced, 5% were widowed and 5% were separated. The majority (86%) had been married only once. Fifty-one percent were Protestant, 37% were Catholic, 8% were Jewish. In the last year, 35% had attended church a few times or not at all, 7% attended once a month, 14% attended twice a month, and 43% attended once a week or more. Nineteen percent of the respondents had less than a high school education, 26% were high school graduates, 21% had completed some college, 17% had received Bachelors degrees, and 8% had received graduate or professional degrees.

Fifty-two percent of the parents answered the questionnaire with reference to their male children. Forty-two percent of collegiate young adults who were the focus of the study lived at home; 20% lived in dormitories; 22% lived in houses, apartments or duplexes with other students; 5% lived alone in an apartment or rooming house; 5% lived with other relatives; and 1% lived in a cooperative or commune. Thirty-nine percent of the parents had conversations every day with these children, 41% had conversations at least once a week, 17% at least once a month, and 2% every two to three months. Twenty-two percent of the parents provided none of their children's expenses, 45% provided between 1% and 60% of their expenses, and 33% provided between 61% and 100% of their expenses.

Measures

The questionnaire asked parents to indicate how frequently (1 = very frequently, 3 = sometimes, 5 = not at all) they employed different methods of relating to their son or daughter. Five methods of influence were based on the models of social power described by French and Raven (1959). The Reward Method involved parents' offering material rewards for accomplishments; the Coercive Method involved parents' withdrawing material privileges if their child's behavior did not improve; the Legitimate Method involved parents' pointing out their rights as parents to make suggestions: the Referent Method involved parents' encouraging children to use them as models; and the Expert Method involved parents' pointing out the things they had learned as a result of age and experience. A sixth method of influence was called the Reactive Method and involved parents' emphasizing their personal reactions to their children's behavior.

Parents indicated how concerned (1 = great concern, 3 = undecided/ can't answer, 5 = no concern) they would be about 23 behaviors of their son or daughter. Behaviors had to do with attitudes, views and activities of children which could have the potential to create family disagreements. Items included children's being rude to parents, campaigning for a political candidate whom the parents did not favor, indicating they did not believe in the parents' religious faith, and dating a person of a different race.

Parents indicated to what degree (1 = definitely agree, 3 = undecided/ can't answer, 5 = definitely disagree) they agreed with ten statements about University of Minnesota (U of M) students. Each statement involved either a comparison of university students to other people or a relative comparison of their values. Items had to do with whether most U of M students placed a higher value on education, ideas and people than on money; whether most U of M students were more idealistic than other people; and whether they were more sensitive to the needs of others than other young adults.

Finally parents reported how true (1 = Almost always true, 3 = undecided/ can't answer, 5 = almost always false) were six statements having to do with whether they agreed with their son or daughter in their religious views, political views, and morality, as well as the way in which their son or daughter handled money, their son's or daughter's choice of friends, and their son's or daughter's vocational goals. Internal consistency reliability for these six items was adequate (α = 0.70).

Statistical Methodology

Multiple Regression Analysis and Chi Square were used to examine the relationships between characteristics of parents and their perceptions of a generation gap.

Results

The first question in the study involves describing the relationship between certain socio-demographic characteristics of parents and their frequency of agreement with their collegiate children. Table One shows the results of a multiple regression analysis in which these characteristics of parents were found to be significantly related ($R = 0.49$, d.f. = 9/204, $F = 7.16$) to parental "generation gap." In the interpretation of correlations, please note that the measure of parent-child agreement is scored so that a low score indicates a high level of agreement. This set of characteristics accounted for 24% of the variance in parental frequency of agreement with their collegiate children. Size of family makes the largest relative contribution (14% of the variance, $F = 23.07$) to explaining differences in parent-child frequency of agreement. Parents with smaller families tend to perceive themselves as more in agreement with their children. Age of parents makes the next largest relative contribution (5% of the variance, $F = 17.02$) to explaining differences in parent-child frequency of agreement. Younger parents tend to perceive themselves as more in agreement with their children.

Insert Table One

The second question in the study concerns the relationship between various methods of influence used by parents in their relationships with their collegiate children and their frequency of agreement with them. Twenty-three percent of the parents said they had used the Reward Method; 25% said they had used the Coercive Method; 27% said they had used the Legitimate Method; 44% said they had used the Referent Method; 67% said they had used the Reactive Method; and 48% said they had used the Expert Method. Table Two shows that the average parent uses the Reactive Method most frequently, and the Coercive and Reward Methods least frequently. However, there is significant variability among parents in their use of these methods.

Insert Table Two

Parents in most, moderate and least agreement differed significantly ($p \leq .05$) in use of these different methods of influencing their collegiate children. Thirty percent of the parents in least agreement with their children used the Reward Method while none of the parents in most agreement used this method ($X^2 = 21.99$, d.f. = 4, $p \leq .00$). More (45%) parents in least agreement than those (7%) in most agreement used the Coercive Method ($X^2 = 31.93$, d.f. = 4, $p \leq .00$). More (48%) parents in least agreement than those (5%) in most agreement used the Legitimate Method ($X^2 = 33.00$, d.f.=4, $p \leq .00$). More (52%) parents in least agreement than those (29%) in most agreement used the Referent Method ($X^2 = 12.47$, d.f.=4, $p \leq .01$). More (80%) parents in least agreement than those (49%) in most agreement used the Reactive Method ($X^2 = 15.96$, d.f.=4, $p \leq .00$)

Somewhat more (61%) parents in least agreement than those (49%) in most agreement used the Expert Method ($X^2 = 9.73$, d.f. = 4, $p \leq .04$).

The six methods of influencing collegiate children are significantly related ($R = 0.41$, d.f. = 6/213, $F = 7.21$) to parental "generation gap." The frequency with which these methods of influence are used accounts for 17% of the variance in parental frequency of agreement with their collegiate children. Parental use of the Legitimate Method of influence makes the largest relative contribution (10% of the variance, $r = -.37$, $F = 7.21$) to explaining differences in parent-child frequency of agreement. Parents who use the Legitimate Method more frequently tend to agree less often with their collegiate children.

The third question in the study concerns the relationship between parental concerns about behaviors of their children and frequency of agreement with them. Table Three shows how concerned parents would be about various behaviors of their collegiate children. A majority of parents would be moderately or greatly concerned about 21 of the 23 behaviors described in Table Three. Results suggest that many parents are not very concerned about the political behaviors of their collegiate children as long as such behaviors do not involve violence or their children's joining the Communist Party. A majority of parents would be concerned if their children told them they no longer believed in the religion the parents practiced, or if their children joined a religious denomination different from that of the parents.

Insert Table Three

Chi square analysis shows that parents in most agreement, moderate agreement, and least agreement with their collegiate children did not significantly differ in their concern about 21 of the 23 behaviors described in Table Three. More (80%) parents in most agreement than those (41%) in least agreement were concerned because their children spent too little time with the family ($X^2 = 19.41$, d.f. = 4, $p \leq .00$).

The last question in the study has to do with describing the relationship between parental beliefs about typical university students and their frequency of agreement with their own collegiate children. Table Four shows how much parents agreed with ten statements about most University of Minnesota students. A majority views most university students as placing a higher value on education, ideas, and people than on money, as well as being more idealistic, more interested in achieving their educational goals, more politically liberal, and more aware of social issues than other young adults.

Insert Table Four

Chi square analysis shows that parents in most agreement, moderate agreement and least agreement with their collegiate children did not differ significantly in the beliefs about University students described in Table Four.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study are somewhat surprising. There is much "folk-wisdom" about parents and their collegiate children which the data do not support.

Younger parents and those with smaller families tend to agree more frequently with their collegiate children. However, size of family is by far the most significant variable. This finding may reflect a number of factors. In smaller families, parents may have more opportunity to socialize their children to family values and they may also be able to provide more rewards for their children.

The present study expected to find relationships between the frequency of using particular methods of influence and the frequency of parent agreement with their collegiate children. The findings are complex. The use of the Legitimate Method of influence was related to frequency of parent-child agreement. The more often parents referred to their rights as parents when they tried to influence their collegiate children, the more often they tended to disagree with them. However, parents who are in least agreement with their children use all methods of influence more frequently than do parents who are in most agreement. Thus, parents in least agreement with their collegiate children may be inconsistent in their methods of relating to their collegiate children.

Most parents of collegiate children do not appear to be unconcerned about their children's behavior. Also, parents in most, moderate, and least agreement with their collegiate children do not differ significantly in their concern over their children's behaviors. The importance of the family in understanding the generation gap is again reemphasized by the finding that more parents in most agreement than those in least agreement are concerned because their children spend too little time with the family.

Parents' beliefs about University students are not related to the frequency of agreement with their collegiate children. Thus, these results do not lend support to the contention that parents of collegiate children have stereotypes about students which are major factors in the generation gap.

TABLE ONE

MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS BETWEEN SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS AND THEIR FREQUENCY OF AGREEMENT WITH THEIR COLLEGIATE CHILDREN

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE	r	BETA	F
Age of parent	.18	.27	17.03
Frequency of attending religious services	-.27	-.14	3.85
Frequency of parent-child contacts	.04	.01	.04
Number of times spouse married	.19	.22	7.69
Percent of expenses provided their son or daughter	-.19	-.06	.82
Spouse's educational level	-.15	.07	.68
Number of times married	.07	-.24	9.39
Family size	.35	.39	23.07
Educational level of respondent	-.15	.05	.31

TABLE TWO

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS:
PARENTAL METHODS OF RELATING TO
COLLEGIATE SONS AND DAUGHTERS

METHOD	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reward	4.47	1.14
Coercive	4.54	.90
Legitimate	4.37	1.18
Referent	4.09	1.17
Reactive	3.43	1.36
Expert	4.00	1.20

TABLE THREE

PARENTAL CONCERNS

BEHAVIORS	Moderate or Great Concern	Undecided/ Can't Answer	Little or No Concern
Son (daughter) campaigns for a political candidate whose policies you do not favor.	44%	13%	43%
Son (daughter) acts insolent or rude to you.	91%	5%	7%
Son (daughter) tells you that he(she) no longer believes in the religion you practice.	73%	7%	21%
Son (daughter) informs you that he (she) is dating a person of a different race.	70%	16%	14%
Unmarried son (daughter) informs you that he (she) is living with a member of the opposite sex.	87%	8%	5%
Son (daughter) takes part in a campus sit-in.	58%	15%	33%
Son (daughter) receives failing grades.	93%	4%	2%
Son (daughter) smokes cigarettes	64%	6%	30%
Son (daughter) drinks alcoholic beverages.	61%	8%	31%
Son (daughter) smokes marijuana	91%	3%	6%
Son (daughter) is joining a religious denomination different from your own.	57%	12%	31%
Son (daughter) has no specific educational or vocational objectives.	84%	10%	6%
Son's (daughter's) friends make insulting remarks about your religion.	57%	13%	29%
Son (daughter) attends a meeting of the Communist party.	79%	8%	14%
Son (daughter) refuses to do things around the house.	79%	6%	14%

TABLE THREE (CONT.)

PARENTAL CONCERNS

BEHAVIORS	Moderate or Great Concern	Undecided/ Can't Answer	Little or No Concern
Son (daughter) spends very little time with the family.	70%	11%	19%
Son (daughter) is often impolite to relatives or family friends.	91%	5%	4%
Son (daughter) puts off studying for exams or writing papers until the last minute.	72%	9%	18%
Son (daughter) is planning to marry someone of a different religion.	47%	15%	37%
Son (daughter) attends a rally which could involve violence.	91%	4%	5%
Son (daughter) expects you to pay for some bills which were incurred without your knowledge.	85%	7%	8%
Son (daughter) is copying other students' papers.	94%	4%	2%
Son (daughter) tells you that he(she) is thinking of dropping out of school.	86%	7%	7%

TABLE FOUR

PARENTAL BELIEFS ABOUT

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA STUDENTS

BELIEFS	Agree/ Probably agree	Undecided/ Can't Answer	Disagree/ Probably disagree
Most (U of M) students place a higher value on education, ideas and people than on money and materialistic things.	64%	25%	10%
Most (U of M) students are more idealistic than other people.	57%	27%	15%
Most (U of M) students feel that working on their studies and achieving their educational goals is more important than having a "good time".	64%	21%	14%
Most (U of M) students are concerned with having a "good time" and not with the realities of life.	6%	23%	71%
Most (U of M) students are more sensitive to the needs of others than other young adults.	35%	37%	27%
Most (U of M) students are less inhibited about their sexual behavior than other young adults.	34%	39%	27%
Most (U of M) students' political orientations are more liberal than other young adults'.	54%	32%	14%
Most (U of M) students feel more free to deviate from social rules than other young adults.	37%	30%	32%
Most (U of M) students are more aware of social issues than other young adults.	65%	21%	13%
Most (U of M) students' values are no different from the values of other young adults.	41%	27%	32%

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